

# Lora B. Peck Elementary School

Houston, Texas



## INTRODUCTION

A teachers' first day of school at Lora B. Peck Elementary begins with a bus ride. The bus takes Principal Carlotta Brown and her staff of teachers to King Slide, a park in Houston, Texas. There they plunge down the slides, get to know each other, and bond in a way that might not happen in the school setting.



*The school mascot*

This is not just a fun first day, however. It is a carefully crafted experience meant to take teachers out of their comfort zones. "It builds teamwork," one teacher says, "Because if I go on that slide, I am asking, 'are you going with me?'" "By the end of the day, the teachers' trust in one another is palpable," a teacher says. The trust in each other become the foundation of the school's success.

The sense of caring for one another extends beyond the school to embrace students' families. Located in southeast Houston, Lora Peck Elementary sits in a predominantly low-income neighborhood. Nearly nine in ten (88%) Peck students qualify for subsidized meals, and many students and their families deal with extraordinarily difficult life issues, from lack of food to neighborhood shootings.

## MAKING PARENTS ROLE MODELS

When Carlotta Brown began serving as principal, many parents had adopted a casual, not to say disrespectful, attitude toward school, dropping off and picking up their students at all hours of the school day. One of Principal Brown's first policies stated that students must be in school 90% of the school day to be counted as present. That caught parents' attention, and regular attendance rose. Even today, however, if a student is missing from school or a Saturday tutorial, Principal Brown herself drives to the student's home to see what happened and will drive students to school or a tutorial if necessary.

## Student Demographics

Lora B. Peck Elementary School  
Houston, Texas

<http://es.houstonisd.org/PeckES/>  
390 students, K – 5

African American	75%
Hispanic or Latino	25%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	88%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	21%
Special Education Students	5%
Student Turnover rate	18%
Average Teacher Turnover rate	20%
Student/Teacher Ratio	17:1

Early in Principal Brown's tenure some parents showed up at school in inappropriately informal dress. She took these parents in hand and explained that they may not appear at school so dressed and firmly turned them away, as she did any parents using inappropriate language on school grounds. "Your children look to you, and you are the model for how they will dress and talk," she told parents, "I know you want your children to grow up and be successful, and the only way they can do that is to learn what is appropriate to wear and say."

"I think we are learning as a community," a parent of a Lora Peck student says, "I hope we are getting better at understanding what is important. As we get it, our kids will get it. It has to start at the top. We are lucky to have Ms. B."

For her part, Ms. B. has guided Lora Peck students to achieve at the highest levels. The attitude of "Yes you can!" permeates the school. Classroom bulletin boards and signs on doors remind students that there is nothing that they can not do.

"I can do all things," proclaims the motto in one classroom. A student who hesitates, confessing "I can't add this," is answered by the joyous shouts of other students: "Yes you can! We can do all things!" Many images across the school affirm that not only can each child succeed, it is essential that each child succeed. No student in this school will be a "bad" statistic; the Principal and staff at Peck will not allow that to happen.



*Principal Carlotta Brown sets a tone of caring and respect at Lora Peck.*

## **DOING WHAT IT TAKES TO GET IT DONE: "BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL"**

Everyone's focus at Peck is on the students. All staff members in the building know the names of all students, what they like and dislike, as well as something positive they have achieved. Acknowledging their positive achievements has something to do with students' academic success and progress. As a student explains, "There is one very special thing here at our school. The teachers never leave a student behind. They do whatever it takes so we can succeed. They will put you in tutorials or whatever you need."

Parents praise this type of one-on-one support that students receive at Peck. "I transferred my grandson from a charter school as they were not able to provide him the education he needed," a parent says. "I was apprehensive at first but since he has been here, he has gone from just going to school to really learning. When he gets home, he is still talking about school." Students' enthusiasm and their love of learning permeate the campus.

One teacher put it together well, "We have high expectations; I want to give students the power of knowledge, thinking and reasoning. I want them to know they are good, that they can do it. Don't ever think that you can't do it." The staff at Peck is committed to all children's success, no matter where they are from or where they are

in the learning process. Students learn to examine the skills and knowledge that they have now and learn how they will acquire the skills and knowledge they will need. With their teachers they watch the trajectory of their learning rise.

With high expectations come high levels of support. Students are in school from 8:00 – 3:30 every day, except on alternate Fridays, when they are dismissed at 12:45 so that their teachers can participate in a Professional Learning Community. Extended day classes are available daily from 3:30 – 5:30; a Saturday tutorial from 8:00-12:30 provides assistance to all students in small groups. Students not only receive support in the extended day and tutorials but in classroom interventions as well.

Peck teachers put in extraordinary amounts of time with their students and at the school. They believe that for students to be successful they must have dedicated and motivated teachers. “Students need to feel your level of motivation and dedication. Then they are motivated to learn. You have to be dedicated to your school, students, principal and colleagues,” a teacher explains. Teachers feel love, hope and respect at Peck. “I am not just a position here. I am wanted,” a teacher says.



*Students receive plenty of one-on-one support.*

## **DIVERSITY OF INSTRUCTION METHODS**

Instruction has been central to the success of Peck School. Teachers are given time to meet daily in grade-level teams to work together, discuss what they are teaching, and what lessons or units they need to plan or make adjustments to. When they request something from Principal Brown they must answer one question: “How will it enhance instruction in the classroom?”

In a second- and third-grade split class, students are actively engaged in discussing math ideas while their teacher probes and listens for clues to understanding. She is quick, exuberant, and lively. The third grade students gather around a cloth screen overlaying the chalk board. “What have we been working on?” the teacher prompts them. Hands go up as students respond, “Multiplication!” and in answer to her further prompting, “What about multiplication?” they explain that “We are learning what makes a group.” Their eyes on the screen, the students are asked what they see. “I see some apples on the trees and some on the ground.” In rapid fire the teacher asks, “What are several ways we can represent the apples? What are some other ways we can represent them? What is our next number? How did you figure that out? Does anyone else have another way to figure it out? Explain to us why you did it differently? Are both of these examples correct?”

Students work, creating number sentences to frame their answers. The teacher continues to ask questions and challenge students to look at problems another way or represent their solutions another way. As the third graders transition to their desks for independent work, a group of second graders join their teacher at the screen for a lesson

on money. Both groups work with higher-order questions and think analytically. The lesson is differentiated for grade levels and for different kinds of learners.

Fourth-grade students in a English as a Second Language class are drawn into a lesson where they are learning to write sentences that build on each other and are not linear. A group of students stands in front of the class in a straight line; each has been given a card to read. As they read one by one, they pass a ball of yarn down the line. Next, a group of students stands in a circle, reading back and forth, building on each other's reading sections until they have a web of yarn among them. They squeal with excitement as they see this nonlinguistic representation come into being.

Students go into groups at their tables and generate possible topics to write about, and then decide on five sentences that will follow and build on each other. Each group reads its sentences to the class and students discuss what they have learned.



*Students show enthusiasm for learning.*

Over in the Pre-K and kindergarten area, Pre-K students are allowed to go to the block center while their teacher works with the kindergarten students. One girl runs excitedly to the block center, studies the choices, then begin taking out blocks and arranging them. Another child comes and begins to help; as they work, they decide they are building a school—indeed; they are building Peck Elementary School. They discuss things they know Peck has (cafeteria, office) and begin searching for the right blocks to represent them. They make a plan and assess whether they have built everything “right.” Without explicitly knowing it, they have been developing their oral language and pre-literacy skills in a cooperative setting.

Formative assessment is universally used in classrooms. Teachers adjust their teaching based on what they learn minute by minute about their students. Walking around the classroom, teachers watch how their students work and think. They watch how students process information and interact with others. This minute-by-minute assessment will inform their next instruction. Teachers work hard to understand each learner individually so they can push each student to greater and greater achievement.

## **INCENTIVES AND MOTIVATION**

Expectations are demanding in classes at Peck but students rise to those demands and in fact push themselves. Innovative classroom management systems are motivators. Principal Brown buys benchmark assessments from many different sources to see if students can do well on tests in different formats. “I want to make sure that the learning that is occurring in the classrooms is transferring to another context,” she explains. “After all, that is what life is like.” These benchmark tests are given unannounced by the principal. Students accept them, saying that this is the kind of experience they will face in real life and they want to be ready for the real world.

There are incentives for students who work hard and do well. Teachers reward their students for achievement to motivate them and as a classroom management system. Students in one classroom developed their own rules as a group: “Keep your hands and feet to yourselves/ Raise your hand before speaking/ Respect one another and bring materials and homework to class” were the rules they conceived. There is real ownership of these rules and students monitor themselves and others to make sure they are followed.

Another classroom has developed a banking system. A chart describes how much a classroom job is worth and what fines will be imposed for breaking class rules. Another room motivates students with learning games that reinforce their learning. “I Can Do All Things” stickers are handed out to students when they exert extra effort to accomplish learning tasks. Any student who collects ten stickers can go to a Treasure Box to pick out a toy.

The students at Peck only see the world from the perspective of their neighborhood, so after school, they may enjoy pizza parties, train rides, moon walks, and hula hoops. Principal Brown says, “You never know what to expect. We like to surprise the students all the time. It makes school a fun place to be.” Staff members believe that it is important to take students out of the



*A class banking system teaches students how money is earned.*

neighborhood to get a sense of more of the world and see other options and possibilities open to them. If a student is going to succeed, they need to see that there is more of life than just the neighborhood, they say.

Parents appreciate all that Principal Brown and the school does for their children. “She is true to her word. If she says you will get a reward, then you get a reward. I know she didn’t have to do that. Some schools don’t even give pencils.” “I’ve seen that at Thanksgiving and Christmas she gives food to families.” “I know last year she took the kids across the street to get their hair done. It did so much for their esteem.”

## **CONTINUOUS LEARNING**

Teachers at Peck are part of a professional learning community that meets every other Friday for professional development. Events range from having a district representative come and discuss the new math materials or inviting outside consultants to address a topic that teachers would like to know more about to generating their own professional development by reading a common text for discussion. Professional learning does not take place only on Fridays, however. The teachers at Peck talk to each other every day both within and across grade levels. These conversations grow out of team teaching that helps them to gain greater instructional flexibility and builds their professional growth. Many teachers seek professional development opportunities away from school at colleges, universities, and conferences. One teacher describes herself as being aggressive in creating or seizing opportunities

to learn about teaching whenever she can. All Peck teachers welcome opportunities to learn how they might better their craft. They think of themselves as “learners in progress.” They share strategies, techniques and materials, and seek out colleagues to converse with about their teaching.

## **STRONG COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP**

Every day Principal Brown can be found popping into classrooms informally, looking for certain professional practices. She listens for whether teachers are asking analytical questions and expects to see teachers interacting with students directly, engaging students and listening to how they answer questions. Several teachers called her a “champion” for her teachers, noting that she inspires them and enables them to take risks. Before she leaves the classroom, Principal Brown talks to the students about expectations, reminding them it’s their job to do their best and be successful. “You can’t settle for being an average student. You wouldn’t want an average teacher, would you?”



*Peck students are taught not to settle for “average.”*

Principal Brown gives Peck students benchmark tests often. She assesses where they are and gives rewards and treats for scoring well. A whole class that does well might have a pizza party, a fun day, an afternoon with hula hoops, or an excursion to a movie. Individual rewards are candy or small trinkets.

Walking back toward her office, she notices a small piece of trash in the yard and picks it up without interrupting her conversation. At her office, parents are waiting to talk with her. She smiles while dealing with situations as they emerge, fielding phone calls. She is relentless in her vision that all children can succeed and reaches to fulfill it with few resources. Those resources that she does have go directly into funding for instruction and for compensating her teachers twenty dollars an hour for their extended school and Saturday tutorial work. “The key to good management” she says, “is not being afraid to roll up your sleeves and do what needs to be done, whatever it is,” she says, radiating extraordinary commitment and energy.

Principal Brown is unyielding, but open. Teachers describe her “open door” policy and concur that “there is nothing you can’t talk to her about.” Teacher applicants to Peck are interviewed by the teaching staff, among others. Candidates are asked what they can bring to Peck and, emphatically, what their expectation of the passing rate for their students on the state assessment. If the answer is less than 90%, teachers say, they know that this person is not the right fit for Peck. Candidates are questioned about whether they have an issue working on Saturdays (a must for Lora Peck teachers). Finally, candidates must actually teach a lesson that is observed by Principal Brown and the

committee. The candidate chooses what to teach and Principal Brown chooses a classroom. The lesson is debriefed afterwards like any other teacher observation.

Principal Brown's convictions are a filter on the climate in and around Peck. A skilled communicator, she encourages open conversation. She has great enthusiasm and greets teachers, students, and parents alike with a broad smile. When expressing a concern, she speaks with parents, teachers, and students in a calm and attentive way. She asks parents to practice this kind of conversation with their children. It's a style of conversation, she says, that she learned from other principals. She learned two other things from other principals, she says: 1) it's all about people and hard work and 2) it's also all about data and accountability.

Putting this knowledge into practice, her relentless focus on students and their learning and her high-performing staff are factors in Peck's success. To them she would add the community, which wants to see its students succeed, and the students themselves, who want very much to please their teachers, their principal, and themselves.



*Student learning is enhanced through visual representations.*

Ms. Brown and her staff reach out often to students' families. There are many home visits by teachers and counselors, and teachers frequently take children home after tutoring just so they can speak to the parents. Ms. Brown's message to parents is, "These children didn't ask to be on this earth. You need to be responsible for them." A teacher says Principal Brown's focus is unyielding. "She always monitors," a teacher says, "[She] looks at our students' progress reports and puts sticky notes on them to ask, 'Why does he have this grade? Does he need a conference? etc.'" She gives the notes back to teachers and they have to explain what is going on with that student."

That drive to know and support each student personally, to understand his or her academic progress and to push, always, to get that student what he or she needs next underlies the stunning success Ms. Brown has effected at Lora B. Peck Elementary School. She is a strong and relentless leader and her teachers and the neighborhood parents are right behind her "doing whatever it takes" to make all of their students successful.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- How are parents involved in the life of the school? Are they encouraged to visit the school or does the school do outreach meetings? How is student progress communicated to the parents?
- Peck Elementary supports embedded professional development in the form of learning communities. Is there a formal professional development agenda, either at the school or district level?
- The principal seems to be a key element in the students' academic achievements. In considering sustainability, how is leadership distributed in the school?

Lora B. Peck Elementary School					
Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills					
% proficient and above: 5th grade English Language Arts					
	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
All	63	90	86	100	81
Limited English Proficient	45	100	0	100	100
% proficient and above: 5th grade Mathematics					
	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
All	65	91	84	100	94
Limited English Proficient	73	73	80	93	80